DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 130 764 PS 008 859

AUTHOR Terhune, Kenneth W.
TITLE The Paradoxical Status of the Only Child.
PUB DATE Sep 76
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (84th, Washington, D. C., September 3-7, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Birth Order; *Child Development; *Child Rearing; Economic Factors; *Family Characteristics; Family Planning; Family Structure; Intelligence Differences; Mental Health; Parent Child Relationship; Physical Health; *Research; Self Esteem; *Siblings; Social Development; Stereotypes
IDENTIFIERS *Single Child Families

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the popular stereotypes and research relating to the single child family. Advantages small families experience include more money available for each child, more attention from parents, healthier children, higher intelligence among the children, and less family tension. Concern over only children centers on their being spoiled and having to deal with greater parental stress. Little evidence supports the notion that only children are spoiled. They do, however, exhibit slightly higher self-esteem which may contribute to the stereotype. Studies on mental health and family size indicate that adults reared in one and two child families are disproportionately represented among schizophrenics, neurotics, and alcoholics, though not among people with antisocial disturbances. Research has also found that only children were overrepresented among obese patients. These results, however, are not conclusive. Surveys of only children have reported that 60% saw their lack of siblings as a disadvantage. These paradoxes -- the prevalent view of the only child as spoiled despite contrary evidence, and the reported dissatisfaction of adults who were only children despite the numerous advantages -- are discussed. (SB)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED130764

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

The Paradoxical Status of the Only Child*

Kenneth W. Terhune

Institute for Survey Research

Temple University

PS 008859

The only child is a mystifying subject for the investigator. For on the one hand, the single child family seems to benefit everyone: the only child himself, through sundry material and psychological advantages; the parents, whose burdens are lightened in several ways; and society as a whole, which benefits from the reduction of population pressures and perhaps from an increase in the proportions of competent and healthy members. Most of these benefits are indicated by research. On the other hand, studies reveal a widespread and persistent belief among the populace that having an only child is to be avoided.

How shall we as social scientists react to these seeming contradictions? Shall we simply say the masses have without justification perpetuated an erroneous myth? Unless we can explain why the myth, such a conclusion leaves us in a dissatisfying, suspended state, not to mention the unflattering picture we convey of conventional wisdom. It seems preferable to carefully examine the research evidence and the popular stereotype in an effort to understand both. Thoughtfully considering both sides may also lead to further valuable research. Toward these ends, my paper today is directed. I will draw my evidence from a review I made of research on the actual and perceived consequences of family size, which was published by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (Terhune, 1974).

---

* Paper presented at the annual meetings of the American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., September 1976.

Revealed Advantages of the Single-Child Family

The only child is a prime beneficiary of the advantages of the small family generally. While research has not always decisively separated family size correlates from the effects of birth order, social class, and other confounding variables, the following small-family advantages receive fairly consistent support:

(1) Expenses are less and the standard of living is higher. We may therefore assume that there is more money available to be spent on each child's physical needs, his education, and amenities.

(2) The parents give to each child more attention and encouragement, better physical care, and greater interest in the child's education.

(3) The children are healthier, as revealed in lower infant mortality, fewer illnesses, and higher rates of physical growth and sexual maturation.

(4) Intellectually, the children on the average exhibit higher intelligence, perform better in school, and attain higher educational levels.

(5) Family tensions and conflict are less in the small family, and the children generally exhibit fewer behavior disorders such as delinquency.

In these various advantages, there often is little difference between the only child and those from a two-child family. The only child may

be most advantaged on the financial side, while intellectually he may be not quite as well off as the average child in a two-child family. On the whole, however, the only child tends to be advantaged in all the areas cited.

In my own research on approximately 600 Buffalo-area women, the respondents were aware of some of these advantages, particularly in their ability to financially support and give attention to an only child. But research by myself and others indicates that adults are usually more concerned with the personality and social development of only children, as commonly expressed in the view that they tend to become "spoiled." So next let us consider the evidence regarding this idea.

The "Spoiled" Only Child?

What can be said for the personality development of only children in comparison with others? Here we have studies in abundance, but alas, most suffer from considerable methodological weaknesses, such as using crude personality measures and failing to account for confounding variables such as social class and birth order. Further, studies of adults were rare. Finally, relationships found were generally weak, so all-in-all we must be very cautious in our interpretations of the data.

Given these caveats, what tendencies may be observed?

(1) There is little evidence that the only child is spoiled, if that concept refers to dependence, lack of ambition, and inability to get along with others. On the contrary:

(a) the only child appears somewhat more self-sufficient and independent; (b) small-family children generally exhibit higher aspirations and initiative; and (c) only children tend to be more socially outgoing and more socially accepted by their peers.

(2) Only children do appear to have slightly higher self-esteem, and small-family children exhibit slightly greater tendencies than others to be socially dominant and aggressive. Possibly these are manifestations of the self-centeredness, conceit, and "wanting one's own way" that are stereotypically attributed to the only child, but we would need more direct measurements of those attributes before conclusions could be drawn.

The personality data, consequently, give little support to the obnoxious stereotype of the "spoiled" only child. Possibly some might find his independent, confident, assertive qualities offensive, but apparently his social skills are winning qualities with peers.

Stresses on the Only Child?

Not infrequently in "expert opinion" and in surveys one finds the view that the mother of the only child tends to be unsure and anxious, causing anxiety and even maladjustment in her child (Adams, 1972). I have found neither a really convincing theory as to why the only child should become maladjusted, nor solid evidence to this point. Yet there are a few clues which suggest that the situation of the only child may not be one of complete felicity.

I indicated above that research evidence shows children in small families to benefit from better care from their parents--mothers were found to spend more time with each, gave better physical care, and showed more interest in their children's school progress. These findings were not always pronounced, but they were consistent. Could it be, however, that as some adults seem to think, that the parent of an only child may be too attentive or over anxious in handling his or her child? Evidence here is unfortunately limited, and we are unable to distinguish in the data between maternal behavior towards only children and that towards first-borns generally. The two relevant studies I found did show that mothers of first-borns and onlies were somewhat less successful in feeding their infants and they tended to interfere with their children's task performance in an experimental situation. This is slim evidence indeed, but at least it is suggestive.

Let us next consider studies of mental health and family size. Although none offered much in the way of theory, there have been a number of studies on this point. As with the personality studies, methodological problems abound and results were so frequently negative or weak that one is tempted to conclude there is nothing worth mentioning. However, when the occasional study does exhibit the hint of a relationship, those from one and sometimes two-child families tend to be disproportionately among the disturbed. This is not true of antisocial disturbances, but it is true among adults classified as schizophrenics, neurotics, and alcoholics. Certainly more exacting, well-controlled studies are needed in this area, but we do have some evidence that only children tend to be more subjected to or vulnerable to stresses.

Frequently it is the case in family size studies that results are clearer when we move from psychological to tangible manifestations. Thus it is in the case of obesity, which, while physical, is suspected of psychological origins. Researchers Bruch and Touraine (1940) detected in their comparison of obese and nonobese children that the mothers of the obese ones overtly displayed solicitude and protectiveness, which they felt covered underlying attitudes of aggressiveness and hostility toward their children. There existed an atmosphere of precarious emotional security for the children, who were offered food as the only way the mother had of expressing affection and devotion. Of interest to our deliberations is that only children were overrepresented among the obese patients. A similar finding was obtained by Tolstrup (1953) in Denmark, and most impressive of all, Whitelaw's (1971) study of 1,120 British boys found definite negative correlations of obesity with family size, a result replicated across social classes.

What to make of these results? They certainly do not prove that only children are made maladjusted by overprotective, anxious mothers. They do suggest, however, that only children, and perhaps first-borns generally, may be more at risk of disturbance <u>if</u> their mothers are themselves anxious and insecure.

Finally, what about the views of only children themselves? Do they provide clues as to the benefits and risks of being without siblings? Again, there are few studies to this point. A 1950 Gallup poll (Cutts & Moseley, 1954) reported that 60 percent of adults who were themselves only children felt that being an only child is a disadvantage. In my

own sample of Buffalo area women, most respondents said they liked their family size of origin "quite a bit" or "a lot." Among the 29 who were only children, however, nearly half said they liked their family size "not at all." And whereas there was generally a positive correlation between family size of origin and desired family size, I found the tendency reversed among onlies, who wanted an average of three children. A similar tendency was found among teenagers in a study by Kit Frohardt-Lane of the University of Michigan.* Now to be sure, from such studies we do not know specifically what only children may consider aversive about that family size, but considering the several distinct advantages in being an only child, these results also are paradoxical.

Why the Paradoxes?

This review of the major research findings on the only child still leaves us without clear explanation as to why having an only child should be abhorrent to so many. Let us consider the two paradoxes to speculate from whence they may arise.

The first paradox is that despite the prevalent view that the only child is spoiled, there is little evidence to support the stereotype, and much evidence to contradict it. Part of the explanation for this may lie in the omissions of research, for it is true that little effort has been made to detect attributes like egotism and selfishness. But I suspect a more productive line of inquiry would focus not on the personality of the only child, but on the nature of his interactions with his parents. If the only child receives more attention from his parents, it is possible that he learns to expect it. His desire for and seeking

---

* Personal communication

of attention from his parents is likely to increase, the fewer the peer companions available to him. While doubtless many parents enjoy the more extensive interaction, and will take the opportunity to develop a close relationship with their child, others may find the demand on their time and capabilities to be burdensome, and come to feel their child expects everything to revolve around him, or at least that he is too dependent on them. Have not many of us parents at times felt pressed when our child says "What shall I do now?" and do we not sometimes reply in exasperation "Oh, go outside and play!" Research might reveal that these problems arise more frequently with the only child. A worthwhile study would be one that compares family sizes on the amount of time each child spends alone and in interaction with parents, siblings, and companions outside the family. It would be especially important to examine parents' perceptions and feelings about the amount of attention each child seeks from them.

The second paradox is that, despite the numerous advantages there are to being an only child, substantial portions of adults who are themselves only children report dissatisfaction about their siblingless state. To be sure, this indication is not solidly established and needs further investigation. But assuming the validity of these findings, what is likely to cause an only child's dissatisfaction? The most obvious hypothesis is that only children tend to miss the intimate companionship of siblings, but this needs to be investigated. It would be valuable to compare only children with others on how many playmates they have, how much time they spend in interaction with those playmates, and the nature of relationships with siblings in comparison with relationships with nonfamily children. An important control variable would be

the environment of the family, viz., the number of children available in the neighborhood.

Another hypothesis is that only children particularly suffer when their parents have emotional problems, are rejecting, or are especially demanding of good performance. Siblings may be a source of comfort and help to dilute the effects of the problem parents, a subject well worth investigating.

In conclusion, I think we can safely convey to prospective parents that having an only child is no disaster, and there are very real benefits to it. But we are obligated to tell the whole story as we now know it, and to investigate the story further so that the information can be used for more enlightened family planning.

REFERENCES

Adams, Bert N. Birth order: a critical review. Sociometry, 1972, 35, 411-439.

Bruch, Hilde, & Touraine, Grace. Obesity in childhood. V. The family frame of reference. Psychosomatic Medicine, 1940, 2, 141-182.

Terhune, Kenneth W. A Review of the Actual and Expected Consequences of Family Size. U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Publication No. (NIH) 75-779, 1974.

Tolstrup, Kai. On psychogenic obesity in childhood. IV. Acta Pediatrica, 1953, 42, 289-304.

Whitelaw, Andrew G. The association of social class and sibling number with skinfold thickness in London schoolboys. Human Biology, 1971, 43, 414-420.